

Fighters may face stiff penalties

I recently overheard a conversation to the effect that a group of Vernon doctors may decide to boycott junior hockey games in Vernon to protest the rise in violence in the sport.

Whether the rumor holds any validity isn't my concern and it's not the topic of this piece either. What does concern me is that if the above piece of information is true then it must say something about the state of the sport at the junior A level.

However, if the good Vernon doctors have seen fit, in their wisdom and collective professional attitudes, to make a statement about violence in hockey then it says something for the National Hockey League general managers. The GM's are meeting in Florida to discuss the possibility of imposing rules in the NHL to deal more severely with players who fight.

I was under the assumption that the average NHL GM was a guy like John Ferguson, of Winnipeg Jets. Ferguson is the man solely responsible for the NHL career of Jimmy Mann, now of Quebec Nordiques, formerly with Jets, who is still jostling around in the major league because of his ability to pummel everyone in the league. It's certainly not anything to do with playing the

game that has kept Jimmy in the pros for the past five years.

The rule the GMs are apparently going for would be for an automatic misconduct penalty for anyone who fights, in addition to the five minute major and also an extra two minutes in the sin bin for the guy who throws the first punch.

Naturally, the rule would have to be passed by the NHL Board of Governors prior to becoming a part of the NHL constitution but it does illustrate the fact that GMs in the NHL are certainly changing their approach to the game.

Of course, once fighting has been all but removed from the game, everyone will enjoy it once again and they'll all come back in droves to see it played. Somehow I don't think so.

The basic trouble with the NHL nowadays is not so much that there's too much fighting, but more likely that there's too little hockey being played between the fights. Nobody seemed to object to the fighting when there were just six teams in the league and everyone was considered a star.

In these days, however, with the talent watered down considerably and the action on the ice likewise, the fighting seems to stick out more on the slow nights. If the game is good,



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the action fast and the plays superb, nobody seems to mind the odd fisticuff break in the action and that's the way it's always been in hockey.

One has to ponder whether people are coming out to watch good sportsmanship or just simply entertainment. A few years ago, Vernon Lakers and Shuswap Totems played well against each other and all shook hands at the end of the game. It was, and still remains, one of the best examples of how young men can compete in a sport like hockey to the best of their abilities and still remain on friendly and sportsmanlike terms with one another.

However, the games didn't draw many fans out. But bring the big bad Penticton Knights to town with no

love lost between the two teams, good hockey and almost always a fight of some kind on the ice, and the best crowds always show up.

Similarly, when Merritt Warriors come to town, the crowd gathers in abundance at least a half hour before the game and they aren't there to watch the teams warm up. Lakers and Warriors have a habit of brawling each other prior to game time these days and it brings the darndest people out of the woodwork to watch. If a playoff series is marred by fights and brawls, nothing is a better drawing card for a team owner ... and that's a fact.

The point is, like it or not, a lot of people enjoy fighting in hockey and personally, if the game is good and the plays are fast, I couldn't care less if there are a couple of fights because it doesn't detract from the game for me. At the same time, I really don't care if they fight or not.

The bottom line seems to be that everyone supports a winner, regardless of what they do to win. Philadelphia Flyers won two Stanley Cups by intimidating the opposition and brawling their way around the league. They also played excellent hockey and they drew bigger crowds than anyone wherever they played.

Edmonton Oilers have at least five

players on their roster currently whose sole occupation it is to engage in brawls if the occasion arises. They still draw better than anyone else in the NHL both at home and on the road.

Fortunately for junior hockey fans who abhor the violence, teams will be required to wear facemasks in future years, like the major junior leagues around the country have already introduced.

Fighting, under these conditions, becomes obsolete because players simply can't punch through a wire screen around a guy's face.

In the Soviet Union, hockey fans are staying away in droves these days and the reason, according to Soviet News agencies, is that there isn't enough action in the full, defensive Soviet hockey style to suit the tastes of the Russian fans. They honestly believe that in order to make the game more attractive, they'll have to incorporate what they see as the most attractive aspects or the North American game ... more goals and more fighting.

Rules may come and rules may go and people can go on bashing any aspect of the game they want. One fact remains. If the play doesn't improve, it doesn't matter a lick what anyone is doing out there.